

Transparent Opacities: The West Building of the North Carolina Museum of Art

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Abstract

KRISTIN HAWLEY GOOD: Transparent Opacities: The West Building of the North
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This paper critically examines the North Carolina Museum of Art's West Building, designed by Thomas Phifer and Partners. Drawing on the methods of critical museum studies, I argue that the architecture and installation of the West Building work together to create a sacred space, which elevates a discourse of pure aesthetics under the false guise of "transparency," while structuring a visitor experience that is directly at odds with the museum's stated democratic mission. I frame my argument in response to statements by the museum, architect, and press, which characterize the building in terms of transparency, openness, and democracy. Scholarship on the history and theory of museums, a comparison with the recent expansion of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and evidence from visitor feedback and staff interviews inform my analysis.

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Introduction

On April 24, 2010, amidst a flurry of media fanfare, the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh opened its much anticipated new West Building (Figures 1–2). The result of eight years of planning and three years of construction and installation, the 127,000 square foot, single-story building designed by Thomas Phifer and Partners boasts more than 65,000 square feet of exhibition space, a restaurant, and museum shop, as well as a number of new acquisitions, including a gift of twenty-nine bronze casts of works by Auguste Rodin from the Cantor Foundation. Championed as evidence of the state’s commitment to the arts and the welfare of its people, the museum represents a significant investment of public funds, and the fulfillment of director Lawrence Wheeler’s vision for a “pure experience” of “light and art.”¹

The idea promoted by most museums, that the museum is a “neutral” space devoted to the singular, ahistorical, contemplation of art, “empty,” apart from the objects it contains, has long since been debunked by scholars of critical museum studies.² However, as Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach have argued, for many visitors, the museum, “a structured ritual space—an ideologically active environment—usually remains invisible, experienced only as a transparent medium through which art can be

¹Dan Gottlieb, NCMA director of planning and design, quoted in “NC Museum of Art Previews New Building That Will House Nearly 750 Pieces,” *Carleton Place* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), April 7, 2010, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic/>.

²See Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, “The Universal Survey Museum,” *Art History* 3, no. 4 (December 1980): 442–69; Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995); and Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995).

viewed objectively without distraction.”³ It is in this context that I will present the NCMA as complicit in this agenda, arguing that the architecture of the West Building, along with the museum director’s vision as executed in the exhibition design, work together to advance an aestheticist, anti-historicist agenda under the false guise of “transparency.” In doing so, I argue that the West Building promotes a type of visitor experience that is both theoretically problematic and at odds with the museum’s stated democratic mission. Drawing on the methods of critical museum studies scholars, who have considered the architecture and arrangement of art within the museum as a complex phenomenon that organizes visitor experience, I consider the “ideal museum experience” as envisioned and constructed by the NCMA through the architecture, installation of the permanent collection, and content and availability of interpretive information. I also consider the actual visitor experience as evidenced from analysis of my own visits, staff interviews, and visitor feedback collected by the institution.

“Reinventing the Museum”

Citing the West Building’s “luminous white interior filled with natural light,” the “imaginative connections among . . . extraordinary works” inspired by the new galleries, and the enrichment of “the interplay of art and nature that has come to define the North Carolina Museum of Art,” a pamphlet publicizing the museum’s expansion and renovation claimed that the West Building “has transformed the Museum experience.”⁴

The NCMA is not alone in its effort to transform itself through an impressive new

³Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, “The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual,” *Marxist Perspectives* 1, no. 4 (Winter 1978): 30.

⁴North Carolina Museum of Art, *Grand Reopening: East Building*, pamphlet (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Museum of Art, 2010).

addition. The last two decades have seen a boom in museum construction, prompting one critic to remark, “it sometimes seems that every one of them has been recently expanded or rebuilt.”⁵ The need for additional space is not the only factor influencing expansion projects. Identity and pride—individual, civic, or national—are strong motivations for museum expansion, and an ambitious building project is one way for a director and trustees to create a legacy.⁶ Landmark museum architecture also promises to draw tourists and may help a smaller or emerging institution to assert its place on the cultural map. In turn, it becomes more attractive to donors and a bigger player in the competition for lucrative traveling exhibitions. Finally, the oft-publicized reason for expansion is that it will not only offer more space, but *improved* space, to serve the museum’s mission.

These physical transformations often simultaneously aspire to embody a transformation of museum values consistent with a shift in institutional priorities from a focus on collections to a focus on visitor interests and needs. As Gail Anderson suggests, “this last century of self-examination—reinventing the museum—symbolizes the general movement of dismantling the museum as an ivory tower of exclusivity and toward the construction of a more socially responsive cultural institution in service to the public.”⁷ Although many museum expansion projects may share a desire to express these values architecturally, institutions and professionals interpret and apply these ideas in their own ways and the expansions will also reflect the values of the individuals (director, architect, trustees, donors, etc.) responsible for their creation.

⁵Dan L. Monroe, “The Museum as Medium,” *Architecture Boston* 14, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 31.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Gail Anderson, *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira, 2004), 1.

The diversity of interests, values, and ambitions represented in a museum expansion mean that efforts at “re-invention” or “transformation” take a number of forms. As Dan L. Monroe has articulated, “the dynamic tension between the art museum as a medium for architecture and the art museum as a medium for the presentation and interpretation of art” has not been consistently balanced, and many examples tend toward one or the other extreme.⁸ The bold architectural statements represented by Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Bilbao have more recently been answered by their supposed opposite—purposefully subdued buildings that seek not to compete with the art, represented by the NCMA’s West building.⁹ However, whether bold statement or “anti-statement,” museum architecture is always ideologically significant. We must, therefore, ask what type of museum experiences these additions create and whether they are, in fact, consistent with claims to transformed values.

Experience Transformed?

This paper critically examines the character of the “transformed museum experience” created by the NCMA’s West Building. Statements by the architect, museum director, other museum staff, and the press overwhelmingly advance a rhetoric of transparency, openness, and democracy when discussing the vision for the new building and describing its execution. This language would suggest that the NCMA is intentionally working against associations with elitism, social control, and hegemonic authoritative

⁸Monroe, “The Museum as Medium,” 32.

⁹Cathleen McGuigan, “Architecture: The End of Excess,” *Newsweek*, June 11, 2010, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/galleries/2010/06/11/architecture-end-of-excess.html>.

doctrine characteristic of museums' historic portrayal in the critical literature.¹⁰ I frame my argument in response to these claims, illuminating the problems and contradictions inherent in the West Building's expression of these ideas. I evaluate the type of space/experience created by the architecture and installation, particularly in relation to the museum's claim of "transparency," and then interrogate its effectiveness in achieving the museum's stated democratic mission.

My analysis begins with a review of the history of the NCMA and its influence on the goals for the expansion and design of the West Building. In particular, the controversial history that led to the construction of the original building (now referred to as the "East Building") on the museum's present 164-acre site sheds light on the discourse of art and nature that would come to define the expansion project and the museum's specific identity as commodity in the "experience economy." I then describe the evolution of the expansion project and the various forces that brought it to fruition, including Wheeler's political and marketing prowess, as well as the significance of the Cantor gift in securing both public and private funds. The chapter concludes with an overview of the museum's stated goals for the new building and introduces Thomas Phifer, the architect chosen for the project.

In the second chapter, I provide evidence of the rhetoric of transparency, openness, and democracy mobilized by the museum, architect, and the press in descriptions of the West Building and use these statements as context for a visual description and analysis of the museum exterior and interior. I then set the West

¹⁰See Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*; Duncan and Wallach, "The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual"; and Duncan and Alan Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum."

Building's design and stated purpose against a theoretical background of the history of public museums since their emergence in the late eighteenth century, comparing it to traditional state or municipal museums, as exemplified by Duncan and Wallach's concept of the "universal survey museum," as well as to the modern museum type, as exemplified by their interpretation of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Finally, I evoke a modified notion of the labyrinth discussed by Duncan and Wallach to support an interpretation of the museum as sacred space. Rather than the "transparent" medium it purports to be, I argue that the West Building functions as a cathedral, its architecture and installation working together to structure an immersive and elevating experience of pure aesthetics.

The third chapter evaluates the success of the museum's stated democratic mission in light of the actual visitor experience it structures. After having shown that the museum fulfills the spiritual function of the temple, I question whether it also fulfills the function of "town square," as Phifer had imagined. I begin with an overview of the concept of "transparency" in architecture, examining alternative interpretations of transparency, and particularly, the relationship of architectural transparency to democratic values. The recent Rick Mather-designed extension to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, similarly described in terms of transparency, openness, and accessibility, yet with a more democratic end result, serves as a point of comparison. Considering the content of visitor feedback at the NCMA, my personal experience as a visitor, and evidence from the critical literature, I discuss visitor expectations and the experience of visitor confusion, arguing that the West Building's general lack of historical information, in combination

with the poor orienting information, may not only interfere with the freedom of circulation and interpretation that the museum wishes to promote with its open floor plan, but that it also functions as a specifically anti-democratic gesture. Finally, I consider the complexities of a “transparent” museum in the postmodern era and argue that the rigid design principles of the West Building restrict its potential to achieve a more democratic, postmodern transparency.

Chapter 1: History of the NCMA and the Expansion Project

Visitors to the NCMA, even if they admire its natural setting, may wonder why it is located so far from the center of Raleigh. If the architecture “naturalizes” the site, the relationship between the two is a deeply historical one, as a discussion of the construction of the original museum building will show. The older structure, now termed the “East Building,” has been renovated and repurposed as a space for temporary exhibitions and certain portions of the permanent collection (Figures 3–4). Although it is consistently contrasted with the West Building, the discourse that shaped its controversial construction nearly thirty years ago both crucially informed and partially prescribed both the West Building’s design and the character of the “museum experience” actively constructed and marketed by the NCMA. After first reviewing and analyzing this historical context, this chapter details the evolution and goals of the expansion project, which include the West Building and renovated Museum Park, and introduces its key players, namely Director Lawrence Wheeler and architect Thomas Phiifer.

History of the NCMA

The NCMA first opened to the public in 1956 in a converted Highway Department office building on Morgan Street, a half block east of the Capitol in downtown Raleigh. Established in 1947 by a landmark legislative appropriation of one million dollars “to purchase a collection of art for the people of North Carolina,” the NCMA proudly describes itself as “the first art museum in the country to be established

with state funds.”¹¹ The appropriation was made in response to a challenge grant from the Kress Foundation, which matched the state’s one million dollars with a gift of seventy works of art, helping to secure a foundational collection for the fledgling museum.¹²

The museum soon outgrew its original downtown location, and in 1967, the legislature established a State Art Museum Building Commission “to choose a site and oversee construction of a new museum.”¹³ Although initially restricted to a specific area in downtown Raleigh near the Capitol, by 1969, the Commission was granted the freedom to choose “a site where ever a suitable one could be found.”¹⁴ The Site Selection Committee appointed by the Commission hired a private consulting firm, Economic Research Associates (ERA), to identify and analyze possible sites for the museum based on criteria developed against the goals and objectives of the NCMA. After scoring eight potential sites according to these criteria, ERA recommended the museum’s present location, a 164-acre plot of state-owned land on the western edge of the city bordered by Blue Ridge Road and Interstate 40, over a site in the government complex downtown, which came in a close second.¹⁵ Despite a public hearing registering a greater number of

¹¹North Carolina Museum of Art, “History of the Museum,” accessed January 31, 2012, <http://ncartmuseum.org/about/history/>.

¹²Ibid. The state’s \$1 million was used to purchase 139 European and American paintings and sculptures.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴State Art Museum Building Commission, *Report of the State Art Museum Building Commission to the 1973 General Assembly, Reports to 1969 and 1971 General Assemblys* [sic] *Summarized and Brought Forward*, prepared by Thomas J. White (Raleigh, NC: May 24, 1973), 4.

¹⁵Economics Research Associates, *Site Selection Analysis*, prepared by Timothy E. Aho for the North Carolina Museum of Art, November 1, 1972. The Blue Ridge Road location was at this time the site of the Polk youth correctional facility and is sometimes referred to as “the Polk site” or “Camp Polk” in discussions of the museum site selection process.

votes for the downtown location, on the recommendation of ERA, the Building Commission voted in favor of the Blue Ridge Road location.¹⁶

Although the downtown site ranked higher across a greater number of comparative criteria, the points awarded for “parcel size and features” narrowly secured a first-place finish for the Blue Ridge Road location.¹⁷ The Programming Committee (members of the Commission appointed to determine requirements and desired features for the new building) and museum staff expressed a strong preference for a large land area of about 100 acres on which to build the new museum.¹⁸ A site of this size would provide ample space both for parking and for anticipated future expansion. According to ERA, the Programming Committee and museum staff also stressed that a large site was necessary for “offering visitors to the Art Museum a ‘total experience’ rather than merely displaying works of art.”¹⁹ Planners envisioned “a park-like setting” with a terrace dining facility and “recreation and play areas for children,” suggesting also that “development of on-site botanical gardens allows strolling over the museum grounds and provides a pleasurable pause from indoor viewing.”²⁰ Improbable as some of these ideas might sound, “a prime natural setting” such as that afforded by the Blue Ridge Road site was also judged to offer “high visibility and identity . . . in concert with the policy objective

¹⁶State Art Museum Building Commission, *Report of the State Art Museum Building Commission to the 1973 General Assembly*, 6.

¹⁷Economics Research Associates, *Site Selection Analysis*, 32.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 4. At least 15-25 acres was established as the minimum size for consideration of a site.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰*Ibid.*

of the Art Museum.”²¹ Notably, ERA falsely conflated the Programming Committee’s concept of “total experience” and corresponding “visibility and identity” with the separate concept of visitor access. While admitting that access for pedestrians via public transportation would be better at the downtown site, and that its proximity to other government and cultural facilities makes it more convenient for many visitors and tour groups, the report nevertheless argues that “visitor access to either site is probably comparable” on the basis that the suburban location (or, more accurately, its landscaping) would promote a more “meaningful” visitor experience:

What must be compared here in terms of the art museum site selection process is the “meaningfulness” of visiting the museum. On this count, Blue Ridge would have a significant advantage because of the possible development of a fuller array of museum facilities (i.e. botanical gardens, sculpture gardens, outdoor exhibits, recreation areas and the like) and the lack of competition from other nearby visitor attractions (i.e. visitation attention would be directed solely at the Art Museum).²²

Not everyone, however, shared the opinion that the type of “total museum experience” permitted by the landscaped suburban setting was worth sacrificing the benefits of a downtown location. As one newspaper reporter described the situation, the site selection for the museum soon erupted into “a controversy of statewide dimensions.”²³ While proponents of the suburban location generally echoed the Building Commission’s arguments, citing the greater space for parking and future expansion, as well as the unique identity, increased visibility, and meaningful “total experience” that the

²¹Ibid., 39. The report claims that in a downtown location, as part of the “densely developed institutional center of the state . . . exposure may be heightened but identity as a completely unique state institution may be lost.”

²²Ibid., 42.

²³Ginny Carroll, “Reinstatement of Art Museum Suit is Proposed,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, April 9, 1975.

museum could create with the aid of a beautiful natural setting, many vocal opponents believed that a location downtown near other cultural and political institutions and public transportation would be more accessible and would help to revitalize the city center.²⁴ In fact, opponents felt so strongly about the issue that they tried to block the construction of the museum on the suburban site by almost any means possible. Between 1973 and 1975, after the site selection had been approved, the chosen property had been reallocated to the Building Commission, and plans for the new museum were underway, legislators repeatedly introduced bills requiring the museum to be located in the state government complex, and a citizens group filed a lawsuit against the Building Commission on charges that the Commission “exceeded its authority by ignoring the legislature’s intent to have the museum downtown.”²⁵

Numerous editorials also appeared in Raleigh newspapers criticizing the selection of the site on Blue Ridge Road and appealing for support of the bills requiring a downtown location. One editorial in the *Raleigh News and Observer* argued that there was plenty of space for both parking and construction downtown in the government complex and observed, “One wonders what the study committee saw during its tour of great museums which sent it looking to the suburbs? Every major art museum in the world is in a central city location.”²⁶ Another journalist criticizing the site selection and the actions of the Commission, particularly Commission chairman Tom White’s refusal to

²⁴State Art Museum Building Commission, Site Selection Committee, *Proposed Sites for N.C. Museum of Art* Hearing, December 14, 1972 (Raleigh, NC: December 22, 1972).

²⁵Carroll, “Reinstatement of Art Museum Suit is Proposed.”

²⁶Fayetteville Observer, “Downtown Site Logical for New Art Museum,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, March 18, 1973.

release the ERA report to the public, took issue with the subjectivity of the criteria applied by the consulting firm, arguing:

For example, one criterion is “visibility, identity.” The Polk [Blue Ridge Road] site got 7 points while downtown got 5 in this category. But why would a downtown museum near the State Legislative Building and the Capitol have less “visibility” or “identity” than a suburban one? Indeed, why wouldn’t it have more, since the museum has long been identified with the heart of state government?

The Polk site scored 5 for “natural setting” while the state government complex scored just one point. Why is an out of the way plot near N.C. State University farms and the State Fairgrounds a more “natural” setting for an art museum than a location close to other public structures that attract tourists and school children?²⁷

Although opponents did not succeed in blocking the suburban site, they did manage to delay construction for approximately three years, “during which the economy deteriorated and the costs of labor, services and materials escalated significantly.”²⁸ The proposed building therefore had to be redesigned within a significantly reduced budget (from an initial estimated cost of \$25 million to the \$10.75 million appropriated by the General Assembly). This scaled-down plan resulted in the loss of almost two-thirds of the proposed square-footage, including the elimination of an entire cluster of buildings partially covered with roof gardens.²⁹ Ironically, after years spent fighting to obtain the larger property, the museum was unable to make use of the additional land for which it had sacrificed the public accessibility of a downtown location.

²⁷“Holes in Art Museum Site Study,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, March 18, 1973.

²⁸State Art Museum Building Commission, *Report of the State Art Museum Building Commission to the North Carolina General Assembly—1975 Session*, prepared by Thomas J. White, (Raleigh, NC: May 14, 1976) 2-3.

²⁹Ernie Wood, “Budget Problems Force Art Museum Space Cutback,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, March 1, 1975.

The new museum building, designed by Edward Durrell Stone, was at last opened to the public in 1983. Much smaller than originally planned, the resulting 60,000 square feet of exhibition space proved insufficient to house the museum's permanent collection and accommodate the increasing focus on temporary exhibitions.³⁰ The design of the Stone building (aka "East Building"), however, seems to have been at least as strong a motivator as the insufficient space in the push for an expansion. Museum staff and critics alike have characterized it as "oppressive," "bunker-like," "a black box," and a "forbidding hulk."³¹ One critic's assessment of the building as "a dark art fortress with its lowering brow and prison slit windows, . . . pompous and distrustful of the people to whom it belonged," in which "visitors wander from dead end to cul-de-sac in the confusing, low-ceilinged galleries, most of which are without any natural light," crystallizes the contrast between "East" and "West."³²

While the East building is certainly portrayed by the museum and press as the foil for the open, light-filled West Building, it should be acknowledged that the outcome of the controversy that established the original building in its suburban setting is what enabled the construction of the West Building, as well as the discourse of art in nature that informed its design. Although the original Building Commission's extravagant dreams of botanical gardens and "architecture displays" did not exactly come true, the surrounding acreage has since been developed to contain a network of walking and

³⁰Eric Gaard (curator of design), interview with the author, Raleigh, NC, October 18, 2010.

³¹Gaard, interview; Richard Maschal, "In a New Light," *Raleigh News and Observer*, April 18, 2010, <http://www.newsobserver.com/2010/04/18/440431/in-a-new-light.html>.

³²Kate Dobbs Ariail, "The North Carolina Museum of Art Opens Up," *Independent Weekly*, April 21, 2010, <http://www.indyweek.com/indyweek/the-new-north-carolina-museum-of-art-opens-up/Content?oid=1385973>.

biking trails, which wind past more than a dozen site-specific works of art commissioned by the museum. Referred to as the “Museum Park,” and renovated more or less concurrently with the planning and construction of the West Building, the surrounding landscape is integral not only to the West Building’s design, but to the character of the “museum experience” currently marketed by the NCMA. In fact, promotional materials use precisely these terms, claiming, for example, that “the Museum Park links art and nature, a hallmark of the overall NCMA experience.”³³ The West Building and renovated Museum Park, then, seem not simply a reaction to the older East Building, but rather the fulfillment and logical outcome of those original frustrated plans for a “total museum experience.” As one critic observed, “With the completion of this remarkable building that connects so hospitably and directly with the landscape, the decision 30 years ago to site the museum on a suburban tract far from downtown at last makes sense.”³⁴

The NCMA’s focus on “total experience” is perhaps symptomatic of the larger shift to what has been termed the “experience economy,” “where not just symbolic goods are traded but experience itself is the object of processes of commodification.”³⁵ In this most recent stage of economic development, the “key offering is not a functional object, but a memory.”³⁶ According to Sandy Isenstadt, as a “practice that specializes in the

³³North Carolina Museum of Art, “Museum Park Backgrounder,” 1, <http://ncartmuseum.org/images/uploads/museumparkbackgrounder.pdf>. The first trail was opened in late 1999, and the park was gradually developed with additional landscaping and commissioned artworks leading up to the opening of the West Building. Also situated in the park is an amphitheater designed in collaboration with artist Barbara Kruger, which the museum uses to display outdoor films and host musical performances.

³⁴Ariail, “The North Carolina Museum of Art Opens Up.”

³⁵Sandy Isenstadt, “Recurring Surfaces: Architecture in the Experience Economy,” *Perspecta* 32, *Resurfacing Modernism* (2001): 116.

³⁶*Ibid.*

shaping of environments,” and “thus the necessary setting and substance for the creation of memorable experiences,” architecture assumes even greater importance in an experience economy:

As tourism has already shown, architecture is both destination *and* sign of arrival. . . . Increasingly atmosphere is the very focus of design, the projected ambient object that will differentiate otherwise equivalent goods and services. More than ever, the spatial setting is the main event and can no longer be understood simply to contain events.³⁷

Accordingly, as museums reorient themselves to the public and compete with other attractions for their leisure time, some have adopted a marketing strategy consistent with this economic model, in which architecture and atmosphere, rather than the museum’s collections, become the destination and main event. As Fiona McLean has explained in *Marketing the Museum*, the true product marketed by the museum is no longer the collection, but an intangible experience, “with all inputs (be they the display, the appearance of attendants, or the atmosphere) being equally important to the composite product received by the user.”³⁸ C. S. Smith has even gone so far as to suggest that, “since all the surveys of the patterns of museum visiting demonstrate that visitors spend extremely little time inspecting any of the contents . . . it is arguable that the overall environment is of greater importance than what is actually displayed.”³⁹ As will be demonstrated in the following chapters, this latter perspective was most likely the one driving the NCMA’s expansion project. Under the leadership of director Lawrence Wheeler, the museum has created a “unique identity” for itself as a destination where one

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Fiona McLean, *Marketing the Museum* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 106.

³⁹C. S. Smith, “Museums, Artefacts, and Meanings,” in *The New Museology*, ed. P. Vergo (London: Reaktion Books, 1989), quoted in McLean, *Marketing the Museum*, 117.

can have an immersive and elevating experience of beauty, nature, and art (in general), and where the collections themselves are secondary.

History of the Expansion Project

Although the expansion project was partially prescribed by the discourse that established the Stone Building on the museum's present site in 1983, its realization was first set in motion in 1994 with the arrival of Lawrence Wheeler as director. Originally from Florida, Wheeler first came to North Carolina to attend Pfeiffer College, where he later returned as Assistant Professor while completing a Ph.D. in European History from the University of Georgia. He began a political career in 1974, when he was hired by the state's Bicentennial Commission to travel the state helping communities develop programs and events (e.g. a new library, bicycle trail, or parade) in celebration of the American bicentennial. In 1977, Wheeler was named deputy secretary of the N.C. Department of Cultural Resources. He served in this position from 1977 to 1985, during which time he familiarized himself with the state legislature and oversaw the long-awaited construction of the museum building on Blue Ridge Road. This experience no doubt increased his political savvy and sway with legislators when lobbying for state funding for the West Building in the early 2000s. Then, in 1985, Wheeler was hired as assistant director and director of development at the Cleveland Museum of Art. In Cleveland, he created tourism campaigns around larger shows, initiated corporate sponsorship for exhibitions, raised \$15 million for the museum's endowment, and

developed a reputation for throwing lavish parties. In short, he learned the business of the art world.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, the NCMA was struggling financially. After former director Richard Schneiderman resigned in 1993, Wheeler inquired about the job, but was initially told that he did not have the necessary art background.⁴¹ He persisted, and although Wheeler had, in fact, never taken an art history course, he was awarded the position in October 1994. Of the decision, curator John Coffey was quoted as saying, “We didn’t need another art historian. What we needed was somebody who could put life back into the institution.”⁴² Although by mid-1997, Wheeler’s ambitious spending had put the museum nearly \$1 million in debt, he refused to cut programming, believing that he had to take risks if he was going to change the institution.⁴³

It was no doubt this risk-taking, combined with Wheeler’s political skills, that made the West Building a reality. Praising him as “the godfather of the Triangle’s cultural boom” in 2000, a writer for the *Raleigh News and Observer* suggested, “not only had he solidified the once shaky standing of the museum but he had also brought politicians and business leaders into the fold through charm, political acumen and sheer will.”⁴⁴ Wheeler,

⁴⁰The preceding biographical information about Wheeler was drawn from Geoff Edgers, “2000: Larry Wheeler,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, Dec. 17, 2005, <http://www.newsobserver.com/2005/12/17/95144/2000-larry-wheeler.html>. This article was originally published as, “2000 Tar Heel of the Year: Larry Wheeler - Director of the North Carolina Museum of Art” in the December 31, 2000 issue of the *Raleigh News and Observer*. Also see North Carolina Museum of Art, “Lawrence J. Wheeler Director,” <http://ncartmuseum.org/images/uploads/lawrencewheelerbio.pdf>; and “Wheeler, Lawrence Jefferson,” *Who’s Who in America* (Chicago: A. N. Marquis, 2010).

⁴¹Edgers, “2000: Larry Wheeler,” 5.

⁴²Ibid., 6.

⁴³Ibid., 7.

⁴⁴Ibid., 2.

feeling the Stone building to be “inadequate to the collection, the audience, and the new North Carolina,” had lobbied for an expansion ever since becoming director in 1994.⁴⁵ By 2000, he had already shifted goals from a renovation of the existing Stone building to the construction of an entirely new facility designed exclusively for the institution’s permanent collections. A new museum, he argued, “fit perfectly . . . into his plan to create a museum campus . . . [where] bike trails, art installations and walking paths would nestle onto the 165-acre site.”⁴⁶ All he needed was money, and a lot of it.

Wheeler’s golden fundraising opportunity was finally found in Iris Cantor, the widow of B. Gerald Cantor, founder of the worldwide securities firm Cantor Fitzgerald, art collector, and philanthropist, whose self-described “magnificent obsession” with the sculpture of Auguste Rodin led him to amass the world’s largest private collection of works by the artist.⁴⁷ In 2000, the assistance of Iris Cantor and loans from the Cantor Foundation enabled the NCMA to host its hugely successful blockbuster exhibition *Rodin: Sculpture from the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Collection and Additional Works*. The exhibit drew a record-breaking 300,000 people to the museum during its four-month run, 190,000 of whom paid to see the exhibition, “putting the Museum on the map with those in much larger communities.”⁴⁸ After Wheeler convinced a reluctant Iris Cantor to

⁴⁵Ariail, “The North Carolina Museum of Art Opens Up.”

⁴⁶Edgers, “2000: Larry Wheeler,” 1.

⁴⁷David Steel, *Rodin: The Cantor Foundation Gift to the North Carolina Museum of Art* (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Museum of Art, 2010), vi. Through the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Foundation, the Cantors, credited with popularizing Rodin in the United States, have donated many of the artists’s works to universities and museums (including a significant collection to Stanford University), and have sponsored many Rodin exhibitions across the country.

⁴⁸Andrea Weigl, “A Place Open to Beauty,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, April 18, 2010, <http://www.newsobserver.com/2010/04/18/442359/a-place-open-to-beauty.html>; Steel, *Rodin*, vi.

attend the exhibition's opening, she reportedly "left just enamored of the museum" and fond of Raleigh and the surrounding area. The success of the exhibition was a deciding factor in Cantor's decision to donate much of the collection to the NCMA.⁴⁹

Cantor's donation not only added prestige to the museum's collection, but, according to Dan Gottlieb, NCMA director of planning and design, "the Cantor gift of the sculptures was the catalyst for making this new building happen."⁵⁰ While on the one hand wooing Cantor with the promise of a new building, Wheeler was also selling elected officials in North Carolina on the benefit of paying for an expansion that could house her gift. After Cantor's donation was announced, state and local officials committed \$72.3 million in public funds for a new building to house the permanent collection. The prestige of the Cantor gift, making the NCMA one of the largest repositories of Rodin bronzes in the country, not only helped push through funding for the expansion, but stimulated many other gifts of art and private donations, helping to raise \$30 million of the museum's continuing goal of \$50 million in private contributions.⁵¹

In 2006, with substantial public and private funding secured, Wheeler could finally begin the new building, which he was determined would bear no resemblance to its dark, bunker-like predecessor. "Wheeler's vision called for a light-filled building open to the surrounding landscape and free to the public, in which art would be presented in a less constricted environment than the existing building allowed; it would also be a

⁴⁹Weigl, "A Place Open to Beauty."

⁵⁰Dan Gottlieb, quoted in David Masello, "The Patroness," *Town and Country*, July, 2010.

⁵¹Weigl, "A Place Open to Beauty."

destination for anyone seeking a place of beauty and serenity.”⁵² Wheeler and museum staff felt that the “black-box” effect of the old Stone building, with its confusing layout and few windows, cut visitors off from the environment, resulting in a sense of disorientation and fatigue. In planning the new building, they thus prioritized ease of navigation, inclusion of windows and ambient light, and a sense of connection to the landscape.⁵³ Wheeler also hoped to present the permanent collection in a new way, using the architecture to prompt visitors to see and think about the works differently.⁵⁴ Finally, there was the challenge of integrating the new building with the existing building as well as the outdoor amphitheater and the expansive sculpture park already on the property. After hosting an international competition in 2000, Wheeler and Gottlieb had selected architect Thomas Phifer, who was still relatively unknown but “had a flair for designs filled with a sense of luminosity and transparency.”⁵⁵ Phifer’s interest in creating a new museum environment that was open, casual, full of light, and easily navigable, seemed a perfect fit for Wheeler’s vision.⁵⁶ Phifer believes that it was his firm’s “emphasis on making connections to nature” and desire to “refrain from competing with the art” that won him the commission.⁵⁷

⁵²Sara Hart, “North Carolina Museum of Art,” *Architect*, July, 2010, <http://www.architectmagazine.com/cultural-projects/north-carolina-museum-of-art.aspx>.

⁵³Gaard, interview.

⁵⁴Thomas Phifer, “Interview with Thomas Phifer,” August, 2006, accessed April 6, 2012, www.tphifer.com/#/interview.

⁵⁵Lisa Delgado, “Disappearing Act,” *ArchNewsNow*, April 21, 2010, <http://www.archnewsnow.com/features/Feature329.htm>.

⁵⁶Gaard, interview.

⁵⁷Phifer, “Interview with Thomas Phifer.”

Although this would be Thomas Phifer and Partners' first large-scale public building, Phifer himself was no stranger to large public projects. Prior to starting his eponymous firm in 1996, Phifer had worked for a decade as a design partner with famed architect Richard Meier. The influence of Meier, who has designed a number of prominent museums including the High Museum of Art, the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Getty Center in Los Angeles (the latter two while Phifer was on staff) is clear in Phifer's work; Meier's acknowledged debt to Le Corbusier and the European architecture of the 1930s has produced projects often similarly characterized by the words "white" and "light."⁵⁸ Also, while Phifer's strong focus on seamless integration with the landscape appears to be in subtle conflict with certain of Meier's ideas, the concept of "dematerialization," which would come to define Phifer's vision for the NCMA, was very clearly articulated by Meier in 1988.⁵⁹ The process of "dematerialization," according to Meier, seeks to integrate a building into its environment in a manner that "subvert[s] the specific character of the architectural surface itself in favor of the character of light and shadow, of context and occupant, that plays against it . . . neutralizing the matter of the frame so that the character of the framed is much more intense."⁶⁰ The concept of "dematerialization" and the "white," "light" simplicity of Meier's modernism, along with elements of classical humanism learned during his

⁵⁸Joseph Rykwert, "The Third Installment," in *Richard Meier Architect 1992/1999*, ed. Richard Meier (New York: Rizzoli, 1999), 20; Quote in reference to title of recent publication by Philip Jodidio and Peter Gossel, *Richard Meier & Partners: White Is the Light* (Koln: Taschen, 2010).

⁵⁹See Vernon Mays, "Everything is Illuminated," *Architect* 96, no. 4 (April 2007), 82; and Richard Meier, "Essay," *Perspecta* 24 (1988).

⁶⁰Meier, "Essay," 104-105.

studies in Rome, lie at the heart of Phifer's vision for the NCMA.⁶¹ Phifer cites the Louisiana Museum in Denmark among his influences, stating that the "domestic . . . human scale," "magical connection between the visitor and art and nature," and "sublime" character of the light he experienced there left an indelible impression on him.⁶² He also acknowledges his debt to Louis Kahn's use of natural light in the Kimbell Art Museum.⁶³

Along with these influences, however, it must be emphasized that the existing building is not merely the architect's, but the result of a close partnership between Phifer and Wheeler.⁶⁴ Wheeler's background in the business and politics of art helped bring the West Building to fruition, while Phifer's contemporary design created both the architectural destination and immersive atmosphere necessary for the memorable "museum experience" that Wheeler sought. Furthermore, as the next chapter will show, the two shared a vision of the museum as a modern temple dedicated to the interrelated values of transparency, openness, and democracy that permeates the design both inside and out, just as it does the rhetoric of the museum and press. In what follows, I examine the architecture and design of the West Building in relationship to these values and evaluate the type of "museum experience" it structures.

⁶¹In 1996, Phifer won the Rome Prize in Architecture and completed a residency at the American Academy in Rome, during which time he was able to explore an interest in integrating concepts of Classical architecture into his practice. These concepts reportedly influenced his design for the NCMA, where he hoped "landscape and architecture will intermingle to create a place of relevance and purpose." See Phifer, "Interview with Thomas Phifer."

⁶²Phifer, "Interview with Thomas Phifer."

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Gaard, interview.

Chapter 2: “A Cathedral of Light”

Transparency, Openness, and Democracy

The West Building, set back both from the busy road bordering the museum grounds and from the parking lot, is, at a distance, easily mistaken for a storage shed (Figure 1). Phifer’s design is essentially a long, low, rectangular box penetrated by smaller rectangular courtyards, sculpture gardens, and reflecting pools, said to represent “the park’s infiltration of the building.”⁶⁵ The peripheral facade is clad in a vertical array of matte-finished anodized aluminum panels, each overlapping the next at an angle. Where the panels overlap, pieces of highly-polished stainless steel reflect the sun’s rays onto the adjacent panel, and, when viewed obliquely, act as mirrors, offering fragmented reflections of the viewer and the surrounding landscape (Figures 5–6). Although from the exterior the facade appears predominantly aluminum, glass walls, which border the five courtyards, comprise fifty percent of the surface area. These walls, veiled on the interior with white curtains and photo-controlled shades, flood the galleries with carefully controlled daylight, allowing visitors frequent (if often veiled or partial) views outdoors as well as physical access to and from several of the courtyards (Figures 7–8). Three hundred sixty-two skylights filter indirect northern light through elliptical openings in a

⁶⁵Hart, “North Carolina Museum of Art.”

grid of ceiling coffers (Figure 9). Between these skylights and the glass walls, natural daylight comprises fifty percent of the gallery lighting.⁶⁶

Descriptions of the building offered by the museum, Phifer, and the architectural press are consistently peppered with language evocative of transparency, immateriality, openness, and porosity. An article in the architectural press aptly titled “Disappearing Act” contrasts the building with the “flamboyant” style of museum architecture typified by Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Bilbao, arguing that “the NCMA seeks to disappear instead, deferring to the beauty of the artworks and the surrounding landscape.” The same article quotes Phifer as saying, “we wanted [the building] to kind of dissolve,” and another reviewer claims, “the walls seem to dematerialize as reflections of clouds and trees float across the surfaces.”⁶⁷ Finally, according to Gottlieb, “from the beginning, the staff knew they would want a new building with a high degree of transparency, in contrast to the East building, a dark, fortresslike structure that is ‘the epitome of opacity.’”⁶⁸

Once inside, metaphors of transparency and immateriality continue in concert with the exterior, as the space performs yet another type of “disappearing act.” The Benjamin Moore Super White walls, white oak floors, and minimalist aesthetic literally leave nothing to “color” one’s perception of the art. Even the works themselves seem to dematerialize, glowing and weightless in the ethereal shadowlessness created by the

⁶⁶For a detailed architectural description, see Hart, “North Carolina Museum of Art,” and Thomas DeMonchoux, “North Carolina Museum of Art,” *The Architect’s Newspaper*, May 5, 2010, http://www.archpaper.com/e-board_rev.asp?News_ID=4521.

⁶⁷Delgado, “Disappearing Act”; Hart, “North Carolina Museum of Art.”

⁶⁸Dan Gottlieb, quoted in Delgado, “Disappearing Act.”

diffusion of light from above. The effect is significant enough to prompt comment by a number of reviewers, who note that the curving coffers create a “soft glow without harsh shadows,” “causing the art to seemingly emerge from the walls and pedestals into high relief.”⁶⁹ The building is called “an ethereal jewel box,” and Gottlieb is quoted as saying, “the more that this building could evaporate into the light, the more successful it was going to be, the more ethereal the space was going to be and, I would argue, memorable.”⁷⁰

Quite literally reflecting Wheeler’s mandate for an “experience of [nothing but] light and art,” perhaps one of the most significant expressions of his purist vision is the extreme reduction of interpretive text.⁷¹ Wheeler reportedly insisted on minimal text, saying that he did not want “a book on the wall” but rather “wanted the art to tell the story” through visual relationships.⁷² The centrality of this aspect of Wheeler’s vision in determining the design and installation of the new building was emphasized by every staff member with whom I spoke, even down to a friendly security guard, who, noting my sustained interest in the Rodin gallery, asked me my opinion. When I remarked on the surprising lack of context, he responded that Wheeler wanted very minimal information because he feels that “the art is the performer.”⁷³

⁶⁹Delgado, “Disappearing Act”; Hart, “North Carolina Museum of Art.”

⁷⁰Sharon McHugh, “Restrained and Reductive, North Carolina Museum of Art to Open,” *World Architecture News*, April 12, 2010, http://www.worldarchitecturenews.com/index.php?fuseaction=wanappln.projectview&upload_id=13795; Dan Gottlieb, quoted in Delgado, “Disappearing Act.”

⁷¹“NC Museum of Art Previews New Building.” Gottlieb is quoted as saying that introducing any color in the galleries “would have been compromising the singular notion of having this as an experience of light and art. . . . This building is about making a pure experience . . . so that all that’s left is the art work.”

⁷²Gaard, interview.

⁷³NCMA security guard in discussion with the author, Raleigh, NC, October, 2010.

The few wall texts that do exist reportedly did not come easily. Exhibition designer Eric Gaard has acknowledged that Wheeler's strict mandate against wall text was, and continues to be, a point of contention among staff members, and several curators pushed for additional allowances in their galleries. The result is that some galleries have significantly more interpretive information than others, revealing the individual styles of certain curators struggling to the surface under the director's severe restrictions. These at first subtle but fascinating differences testify to the role of individual voices in the museum, which thereby resists a wholly unified reading.⁷⁴ Despite these notable exceptions, however, historical context is decidedly minimal.

In the floor plan, the idea of transparency joins the related concept of openness or porosity. The forty interior galleries, which open off a central sculpture hall, are partitioned by a series of white, moveable, free-standing walls, many of which terminate below the ceiling (Figure 10). None of the spaces have four corners, "suggesting but never fully enclosing a series of galleries."⁷⁵ The open floor plan seeks to create a feeling

⁷⁴The curators of the African and Egyptian galleries, who are both anthropologists, reportedly insisted on more than the recommended amount of text. The Egyptian gallery even introduces a black and white photo backdrop depicting the site of an Egyptian archeological dig on one wall in an attempt to subvert Wheeler's minimalist mandate by using "visual context" to enhance understanding of the collection. A similar strategy has been implemented in the Jewish Gallery, in which scrim murals printed in grayscale with images from a prayer book on display partially divide the gallery space, creating a more intimate setting while providing additional visual, albeit colorless, context. However, even these instances of "visual context" were not won without a fight, as both Wheeler and Phifer were reportedly initially against them. The curator of the Northern Renaissance galleries also insisted on wall text, and has introduced additional context via a small "kustkammer gallery," with works salon hung and interspersed with pieces of furniture and decorative arts. Although the visual variety and fleeting nod to history represented here is appreciated, the gallery appears sadly out of place against the ubiquitous white walls in the midst of an otherwise contextually-void universe. The American Art and Portrait galleries, curated by John Coffey, who reportedly had the most difficulty adapting to the requirements of the new space, also represent a slight subversion of Wheeler's requirements. Coffey both insisted on additional text and included comparative comments about multiple nearby works in the labels for several individual paintings. He thereby presents richer and more comprehensive interpretations, prompting viewers to ask questions and make comparisons between works (albeit still in a limited fashion) while adhering to a smaller number of panels.

⁷⁵DeMonchaux, "North Carolina Museum of Art."

of free movement between galleries, just as the three entrances to and from courtyards and sculpture gardens encourage free movement between indoors and outdoors. For example, the transition between the Rodin gallery and garden is described by the press as “a seamless blend of indoor and outdoor space.”⁷⁶ As one critic pointed out, however, the only blemishes on the white interior are the black eyes of security cameras watching from above, a subtle reminder of the contrived nature of “freedom.”⁷⁷

Finally, the concept of democracy features prominently in the rhetoric of the museum, the architect, and the press concerning the new building. The architectural design, freedom of movement in and out of the building as well as between galleries, and an emphasis on individual freedom of interpretation are all mobilized to this effect. According to Phifer, as a public building paid for by public funds, the expansion initiative was described to his firm as “an affirmation of a great public trust.”⁷⁸ During an interview in 2006, Phifer repeatedly made reference to the centrality of this idea in the building design:

The idea of this public trust is absolutely central to our thinking, to our design, to how we are creating the campus. The new campus has to have a sense of belonging to everybody equally. So we knew our scheme had to be accessible and open, accepting, inviting. . . . [The museum’s mission to teach] needs to be there in the architecture of the new building. . . . So making an open, accessible building that has something to say about the connection between art and the rest of the world is a civic responsibility to us.⁷⁹

⁷⁶Delgado, “Disappearing Act.”

⁷⁷DeMonchaux, “North Carolina Museum of Art.”

⁷⁸Phifer, “Interview with Thomas Phifer.”

⁷⁹Ibid.

To express the museum's democratic mission architecturally, Phifer claims to have drawn inspiration from the traditional southern front porch as well as the Roman temple. Of the porch, Phifer states, "In the south, an open porch is an iconic gesture, the connection between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, family life and community life." Phifer describes the West Building's entry plaza, oriented toward the entry of the East Building, as "the garden porch" that serves as the "foyer to the rest of the campus," uniting the two buildings to each other, the outdoor amphitheater, the natural landscape, and the outdoor sculpture. He also describes the "outdoor Garden Galleries" that cut into the periphery as "veritable porches, separated from inside space by window walls." Finally, Phifer notes the influences of Greek and Roman temples with reference to the idea of the porch, or town square:

The ancient Greeks and Romans put a porch just about anywhere they could, especially at temples! Of course, temples weren't just religious sites. They were town centers, they were trading posts, they were meeting places. . . . So if you think of a museum as a modern-day temple, a secular temple, a place where people gather and get information and ideas, then the plinth and the porch really resonate.⁸⁰

Phifer's democratic vision as expressed by these so-called "porches" is apparently legible to at least a segment of the press, who repeatedly refer to the open, accessible, essentially democratic nature of the architecture. The article "Disappearing Act" describes the multiple access points as "creating a porosity that reflects the democratic mission of a state museum that offers free admission to its permanent collection."⁸¹ Similarly citing the fact that admission is free and that visitors "can drop in at [several]

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Delgado, "Disappearing Act."

points through the glassy peripheral courtyards,” *The Architect’s Newspaper* states that “the [building’s] greatest effect may be as much democratic and economic as optic or tectonic. The architecturally-conveyed message [is] that the museum’s primary occupants are not its artifacts but its visitors, and that when you arrive, you belong.”⁸²

The one-story-high scheme, said to create “a feeling of accessibility to visitors and a strong connection to place,” is also central to Phifer’s democratic gesture.⁸³

In Raleigh, our version of the temple is on the ground so you’re seeing art and consuming culture in connection with the outside world. . . . So at our building you’re getting grounded literally and metaphorically, you’re getting to experience art one-on-one in relationship to the world outside instead of going up a grand stair and ascending to art like it’s a sacrament.⁸⁴

As Phifer’s implicit contrast with the imposing facades characteristic of nineteenth-century museum architecture attests, the NCMA, apparently the very antithesis of a “black box,” appears to be actively constructing an identity for itself in direct opposition to traditional state or municipal museums, and in so doing, intentionally working against associations with elitism, social control, and hegemonic or authoritative doctrine, characteristic of their portrayal in the critical literature.⁸⁵ Arguably, however, the NCMA represents a new idiom, not completely free of these old ideas, and perhaps equally problematic. The significance of the NCMA’s programmatic agenda may, therefore, be

⁸²DeMonchaux, “North Carolina Museum of Art.”

⁸³“Natural Carpet Ride,” *ArchNewsNow*, October 6, 2006, <http://www.archnewsnow.com/features/Feature209.htm>.

⁸⁴Phifer, “Interview with Thomas Phifer.”

⁸⁵See Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*; Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*; Duncan and Wallach, “The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual”; and Duncan and Wallach, “The Universal Survey Museum.”

better understood in the context of the history of public museums since their emergence in the late eighteenth century, as theorized in the work of several key scholars.

The West Building and the History and Theory of Museums

Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach have characterized museums as modern ceremonial monuments, which both affirm the power and authority of a ruling class and impress upon the visitor society's most revered values. Accordingly, museum architecture takes on great ideological significance, and early public museums used Roman-derived architectural devices to symbolize state authority, deliberately evoking ancient ceremonial monuments such as temples, palaces, treasuries, and tombs.⁸⁶ In addition to state authority, the new purpose-built museums of the early nineteenth century symbolized museums' roles as secular temples of culture, as the worship of art began to replace the worship of God. The dome and colonnade of the neoclassical facades were soon joined by Christian imagery of cathedral and church domes, and, like spaces reserved for the worship of a deity, museums were often isolated in parks and secluded from views of the outside world to eliminate all external distractions from the divine. By the mid-nineteenth century, monumental museum architecture was established across Europe and the eastern United States.⁸⁷

Drawing on a Foucauldian framework, Tony Bennett has also described the public museum as a disciplinary tool of the nation-state, designed as a place for self-improvement and societal self-regulation.⁸⁸ In addition to the perceived benefits of

⁸⁶Duncan and Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum."

⁸⁷Victoria Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2006), 47.

⁸⁸Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*.

observing the desirable behavior of the elite classes, the emphasis on self-improvement went hand-in-hand with the new primarily educational role ascribed to art objects. This educational function was enforced by a form of museum display governed by principles of evolutionary historicism, in which collections came to be arranged according to representativeness, as opposed to the principles of wonder and aesthetics that had governed their organization in cabinets of curiosity and princely collections.⁸⁹ Fulfilling what Philip Fisher has called the “technology of the series,” artworks were arranged in sequence and combinations so as to instruct the public in particular schools, periods, cultures, or national traditions.⁹⁰ Dubbed the “universal survey museum” by Duncan and Wallach, this type of museum seeks a broad and comprehensive collection with which to illustrate the progress of civilization, and especially that of the host nation, through its artistic achievements. This pedagogy is not only represented visually, but enacted physically by visitors, who, channelled through a series of sequential galleries, march through the history of art, told as the progress of western civilization.⁹¹

The NCMA differs from the traditional public “universal survey museum” in a number of key respects. First, the single-story building with its ground-level entrance, not uncommon in many modern museum buildings, bears no resemblance to the monumental facades of these traditional museums, and Phifer’s strong emphasis on connection to nature contrasts with the often closed-off experience of traditional museum buildings. Also, in contrast to the traditional gallery enfilade, in which visitors process through a

⁸⁹Ibid., 39.

⁹⁰Philip Fisher, *Making and Effacing Art: Modern American Art in a Culture of Museums* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 7, 91-92.

⁹¹Duncan and Wallach, “The Universal Survey Museum,” 450-52.

typically windowless series of rooms, carefully constructed to provide the illusion of a single, seamless, authoritative narrative, the NCMA's open floor plan does not force a particular path or correspond to a strict chronological or national narrative. Adhering to a rough chronology, some galleries are defined by national or cultural boundaries, while others are organized around shared themes. Yet, it is also true that the museum's collection (including European painting, Egyptian funerary art, Greek and Roman art, American, "ancient American," African, European and American modern and international contemporary art, and Jewish ceremonial art) is not comprehensive enough to sustain a more traditional arrangement. In the absence of "an art historically complete" collection, an avoidance of Fisher's "technology of the series," considered "inimical to the logic of the masterpiece," may make visitors less likely to notice the gaps in the museum's collection, and instead create in them a sense of wonder at the many individual "masterpieces" surrounding them.⁹²

Although the nature of the NCMA's collections, spanning ancient to contemporary eras, might have more in common with the traditional museum type, the experience of viewing them has more in common with modern art museums. Galleries in the modern museum, of which the archetype is New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), have been equally criticized for alienating visitors from the environment and taking the form of an enfilade, in which visitors process through the story of modern art as authorized by conventional art history, two things that the NCMA is arguably working against.⁹³ One

⁹²In an interview with the author, Gaard described the NCMA's collection as "not art historically complete," admitting that, as a result, it would not stand up well to a more traditional arrangement. Fisher describes the effect of the series on the category of Masterpiece in *Making and Effacing Art*, 174.

⁹³See Duncan and Wallach, "The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual," and Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (San Francisco: Lapis Press, 1986).

obvious thing the NCMA has in common with modern art museums, however, is its interior whiteness. By the early twentieth century, museum interiors were becoming more abstract and anonymous, and MoMA's "unarticulated, predominantly white partitions" have been cited as an example of "the whitening of museum space."⁹⁴ Critic Brian O'Doherty has described this aesthetic as "the white cube," one that both deprives the art of any architectural context it might have had (as at least some art was originally made for palace or church interiors) and isolating it in "a timeless, limbo-like gallery constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church."⁹⁵ Here, a comparison with Duncan and Wallach's influential interpretation of MoMA, the original "white cube," should help to illuminate some of the particular iconographical tensions at work in the NCMA.⁹⁶

While traditional museums "dramatize the moment of passage from exterior to interior—from the everyday world to a space dedicated to the contemplation of higher values," with grand stairways and imposing, neoclassical facades, MoMA, like the NCMA, was entered on street level through a glass "membrane."⁹⁷ As envisioned by Duncan and Wallach in 1978, the glass curtain wall that marked the entrance to the MoMA staunchly divided public and private, external and internal space. Visitors to this modern temple to individual creative subjectivity initially "experience[d] a heightened sense of individual free choice," as their path was not immediately directed by the

⁹⁴Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum*, 48.

⁹⁵O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 15.

⁹⁶Duncan and Wallach, "The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual."

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 31.

architectural program typical of “traditional” museums (something the authors remarked may have been disorienting for uninitiated visitors).⁹⁸ Duncan and Wallach likened the ritual procession through MoMA’s permanent collection, in which the “pristine blankness” of the “featureless, luminous walls” created a type of “nowhere . . . seemingly outside time and history,” to the archetypal experience of the labyrinth, in which one reaches spiritual enlightenment through detachment from the world of common experience and material need.⁹⁹ At the MoMA of the 1970s, through a similar detachment from the mundane, visitors reached artistic enlightenment by way of pure aesthetic detachment.¹⁰⁰

The West Building as Sacred Space

Certainly the language of Phifer, the museum, and the press reflect a strong desire for a building connected with external reality rather than cut off from it. With frequent views outdoors, in contrast to the original MoMA’s windowless galleries, the NCMA professes to dissolve the boundaries between internal and external space that MoMA helped to construct. But the effectiveness of the museum’s integration with external reality can be questioned. First, the “external reality” or “natural environment” with which the West Building professes to connect is not “natural” at all, nor is it part of the lived reality of most citizens of Raleigh. Rather, “reality” here refers to manicured courtyards and sculpture gardens in a landscaped park-like setting northwest of the city and essentially inaccessible by public transit. Furthermore, as Richard Meier articulated

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Ibid., 43.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 45.

in his “Essay,” a building is “a willful act of artificiality” that exists in a dynamic environment in which the exterior is subject to the effects of weather and time.¹⁰¹ Thus, he argues, one must acknowledge the inevitability of enclosure and question the concept of continuity of interior and exterior space. Rather than pursuing seamless integration with the environment, Meier sees successful integration as a structure’s capacity to enter into dialogue with the temporal phenomena of its environment.¹⁰² While in the early evening, the West Building does indeed softly and elegantly reflect the fading light of the setting sun and shadows of surrounding landscape, throughout most of the day, the building sits awkwardly in the landscape and does not disappear, resembling, as one critic remarked, “a community college, an office building—even a shopping mall.”¹⁰³

More important than physical alienation from the environment however, is that inside, the stark white walls, the luminous, shadowless, ethereal atmosphere created by the filtered natural light, and the minimal contextual information produce a separate spiritual realm, a type of labyrinth, in which visitors are clearly meant to undergo a transcendent experience markedly set apart from external reality. This journey toward enlightenment begins during the approach to the building on the long path from the parking lot. As visitors enter the park-like grounds in anticipation of their museum visit, they are directed on a pilgrimage towards the mysterious shimmering building where they are to be transformed. Functioning as a modern cultural temple, the museum elevates and idealizes art, mystifying the processes of collection and interpretation, and promotes a

¹⁰¹Meier, “Essay,” 104-105.

¹⁰²Ibid., 105.

¹⁰³Maschal, “In a New Light.”

“pure,” essentially spiritual, aesthetic experience. The effect is stated quite plainly by Phifer, who, when designing the building, reportedly sought to create “a cathedral of light—where ambient daylight sanctifies a structure inside and out.”¹⁰⁴ Ultimately, the art, like the building, dematerializes—meaning the material conditions of its production and consumption, its social, cultural, and political influences and agendas, are largely erased.

What is perhaps more insidious, however, is that the rhetoric of transparency, immateriality, and “connection to nature” surrounding the museum, along with the emphasis on openness and individual freedom, creates, in the absence of significant orienting information, an illusion that visitors are having a truly unmediated (“natural”) experience and belies the way that the architecture and installation are in fact working to structure that experience and advance particular ideological values. Of course the visitor experience of the galleries has been carefully orchestrated by the museum; as Duncan observes, no space is neutral. One example of this can be found in the sculpture hall “dedicated to the human form,” which forms the main artery of the museum (Figure 11).¹⁰⁵ Coming in through the main entrance, visitors first encounter Jaume Plensa's glowing wall-mounted figures *Doors of Jerusalem I, II, and III*, appropriately welcoming them into the museum's sacred space (Figure 12). As one processes down the hall, noting a contemporary African figural sculpture off to the side, one confronts a gallery of ancient Greek and Roman sculpture leading directly into the Rodin gallery and outside to the Rodin garden. This foregrounding of the human form, moving from the work of ancient

¹⁰⁴J. Michael Welton, “A New Legacy for North Carolina,” *Inform*, May 4, 2010, <http://readinform.com/feature/a-new-legacy-for-north-carolina/>.

¹⁰⁵Gaard, interview.

masters to a modern one, underlies the museum's humanist program while neatly figuring their impressive collection of Rodins as the key moment of modern sculpture.

Significantly, in the nearly blinding afternoon light that pours into the Rodin gallery at the far end of the hallway, silhouetting the sea of plinth-mounted bronzes in high relief, the procession down the sculpture hall resembles a journey toward heaven itself. In structuring this experience, the museum, far from the neutral frame it purports to be, acts as all cathedrals are intended, to heighten the individual experience of the divine, reimagined here as pure aesthetic detachment. The "transparent" museum may well promote the type of elevating "experience of [nothing but] light and art," desired by Wheeler and Gottlieb. But, as the following chapter will show, the methods by which the museum achieves this experience, and in particular, the many absences that produce its "transparency," have consequences for the NCMA's democratic ideals.

Chapter 3: Transparency and Democracy

The “transparent” architecture and installation of the West Building work together to produce a sacred space, elevating and idealizing art and promoting a “pure,” aesthetic experience. Although problematic in itself, most troubling in this instance is the way the rhetoric of transparency, understood as the building’s ability to “disappear” in deference to the art on display, denies the museum’s very participation in structuring this experience. As will be demonstrated in this chapter, however, through a comparison with the recent expansion to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) in Richmond, “transparency” in architecture may be expressed in a multitude of ways, both functional and metaphorical, and may exist in a less problematic relationship to museum display and the expression of democratic values. Although the NCMA implies a relationship between its “transparency” and democratic values, I will argue that its very interpretation of transparency is at odds with the museum’s mission to provide a democratic and accessible visitor experience. The West Building may fulfill the spiritual function of the temple, but it ultimately fails to create the “town square” that Phiifer imagined.

Transparency in Architecture

The concept of transparency in architecture has a complex history, having undergone shifting material, functional, and metaphorical expressions and interpretations over the last century. Across these various manifestations, as Nigel Whitely reminds us in his essay surveying the history of architecture and transparency, “transparency is not

neutral, nor is it something we are neutral about.”¹⁰⁶ Today, as a buzzword used by corporations, government, academia, and a whole range of institutions, “transparency” is encountered in many different guises, and its meanings are neither simple nor stable. Optically, transparency refers to a material that transmits light; in architecture, this is most commonly glass, but it may also be a diaphanous fabric. However, the concept is not limited to a strictly literal interpretation. As Deborah Ascher-Barnstone suggests, “the modern fascination with making interior and exterior space continuous is yet another manifestation of transparency.”¹⁰⁷ Functionally, transparency may be interpreted as the use of open form or the confluence of form and meaning, and philosophically or metaphorically, it suggests the ability of the observer to discern the true nature or hidden essence of a concept.¹⁰⁸

During the early twentieth century, glass and steel architecture achieved a material transparency whose “triumph over matter” signified modernity and progress. For modernist architects such as Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, material transparency had not only technological and aesthetic, but also ethical dimensions, as clear and logical forms were equated with openness and honesty.¹⁰⁹ Relating these early notions of architectural transparency to more contemporary interpretations, in 2003, Whiteley explained:

¹⁰⁶Nigel Whiteley, “Intensity of Scrutiny and a Good Eyeful: Architecture and Transparency,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 56, no. 4 (2003): 8.

¹⁰⁷Deborah Ascher-Barnstone, “Transparency: A Brief Introduction,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 56, no. 4 (2003): 3.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹Whiteley, “Intensity of Scrutiny,” 9.

In a society that blurs public and private, encourages spectacle and facilitates voyeurism, and gazes both outward and inward, the old modernist belief that transparency reveals truth and honesty seems simplistic and even flawed. Yet the relationship of transparency and honesty in architecture is not completely anachronistic and has, arguably, undergone something of a revival in the last dozen or so years due to some public and social redefinitions of “transparency.”¹¹⁰

The redefinitions to which Whitely refers promoted “transparency” as the process of governmental and organizational accountability understood to be necessary for democracy, for example in the European Union.¹¹¹ This ideal of governmental transparency has also been manifest architecturally, perhaps most notably in Norman Foster’s 1999 reconstruction of Berlin’s Reichstag, where the transparent cupola affords views both outside to the city and inside to the visitors, who symbolically ascend above their political representatives while a central cluster of mirrors offers them fragmented reflections of the parliamentary chamber below.¹¹²

These metaphorical associations with accountability and democracy inform the preference for glass in contemporary museum architecture. I.M. Pei’s transparent glass pyramid at the “Grand Louvre” (1989) is a prime example of a museum expansion that aspired to a union of material and metaphorical transparency. In a critique of the project, Stephen L. Rustow explains how the pyramid, which serves as the new entrance to the museum, embodies something of the early modernist values of openness and honesty

¹¹⁰Whiteley, “Intensity of Scrutiny,” 12.

¹¹¹Ibid., 13. See Catherine Kratz, “Transparency and the European Union,” *Cultural Values* 3, no. 4 (1999): 387-88.

¹¹²Whiteley, “Intensity of Scrutiny,” 13.

while indulging a particularly postmodern desire for a transparency that reveals not only the museum's own processes but the process of history itself.¹¹³

Although frequently discussed in ambitious populist terms, the democratic ideals of transparent museum architecture may not always be effectively realized or fully legible to the public, nor are they likely the only factors influencing design. For example, Whiteley considers the “public accessibility and procedural openness” said to guide the design of Foster’s Reichstag to be “delivered at a symbolic rather than actual level,” noting that although a transparent partition allows visitors to see into the debating chamber, for reasons of security, the politicians cannot be heard.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, one cannot deny the use of glass in new museum architecture as a marketing strategy, perhaps not unlike that employed by banks in the 1980s.¹¹⁵ Whether or not any intended ideological implications of transparent museum architecture are legible to the public, a modern, light-filled museum interior is certainly attractive to potential visitors, and thus to museum boards looking to increase an institution’s revenue and public appeal.

Transparency and Democracy at the VMFA and NCMA

Transparency in architecture, therefore, may be understood and interpreted in various ways and put to the service of different motives. Particularly in public institutions, transparency is often mobilized at least to symbolize, if not to realize, values of public accessibility and democracy. While communicating these values with varying

¹¹³Stephen L. Rustow, “‘Transparent Contradictions’: Pei’s Pyramid at the Louvre,” paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Architectural Historians, Boston, March 29, 1990, note 4, accessed February 28, 2012, <http://www.museoplan.com/doc/pei.pdf>.

¹¹⁴Whiteley, “Intensity of Scrutiny,” 13-14.

¹¹⁵Ibid., 12.

degrees of legibility and success, some interpretations of transparency in museum architecture are more effective than others at promoting a democratic and accessible visitor experience. The analysis of democratic discourse at the NCMA, therefore, will benefit from a comparison to the recent expansion of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA), which offers an alternative interpretation and realization of transparency.

The VMFA expansion opened to the public on May 1, 2010, less than a month after the grand opening of the NCMA's West Building. Rather than creating an entirely separate museum building, the VMFA chose to add a wing to its existing building, forming the latest in a series of five additions to the original 1936 Georgian-style brick and limestone museum. The centerpiece of the expansion project, which also includes a sculpture garden, entry plaza, and landscaped parking deck, is the new 165,000 square-foot McGlothlin Wing designed by Rick Mather, an American-born, London-based architect who has designed numerous museum additions (Figure 13–14). The limestone and glass McGlothlin Wing includes two levels of new permanent collection galleries, a restaurant and cafe, a museum shop, library, education facilities, conservation lab, offices, special exhibition galleries and a lecture hall. A three-story atrium, described by the architect as a “main street,” connects the new wing to the existing building on three levels via glass bridges traversing the central atrium space.¹¹⁶ Stairways and glass elevators also move visitors between floors, and a seating area provides an opportunity to rest. The atrium is bounded on the east and west by window walls, offering views to the sculpture garden and out onto the Boulevard (the main road to the east of the building)

¹¹⁶Rick Mather Architects, “Virginia Museum of Fine Arts,” accessed February 28, 2012, http://www.rickmather.com/practice#/project/virginia_museum_of_fine_arts.

respectively, while likewise permitting views from both the Boulevard and garden inside to the visitors and sculptures present in the atrium. Skylights admit additional natural light from overhead (Figures 15–16).

Comments about the VMFA expansion by the museum director, architect, and press at first glance resemble descriptions of the NCMA, boasting of the “major expanses of glass [that] will allow natural light to pour into the heart of the museum” and emphasizing the transparency, openness, and accessibility of the new space.¹¹⁷ Yet, rather than interpreting transparency as immateriality, stressing views out to the surrounding landscape, the VMFA associates its transparency with a space that is both welcoming and accountable to the citizens of Virginia, emphasizing not only the views of Richmond afforded by the expanses of glass in the atrium, but more important, the ability of the citizens of Richmond to see into the museum. For example, Alex Nyerges, director of the VMFA, is quoted as saying “the architecture is all about transparency from the outside to the inside—people in the Boulevard can see everything that is going on.”¹¹⁸ The feature most credited with this transparency, referred to as the east window, is a 40-foot-high-glass wall overlooking North Boulevard (Figure 17).¹¹⁹ While admitting light and views into the museum during the day, at night the glowing windows are described as beacons,

¹¹⁷Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, “Expansion at VMFA is Largest in Museum’s History,” April 10, 2010, accessed January 23, 2012, http://www.vmfa.state.va.us/Press_Room/Expansion/Expansion_at_VMFA_is_Largest_in_Museum_s_History.aspx.

¹¹⁸Rick Mather Architects, “Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.”

¹¹⁹Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, “Expansion Fact Sheet,” April 9, 2010, accessed March 22, 2012, http://www.vmfa.state.va.us/Press_Room/Expansion/Expansion_Fact_Sheet.aspx.

declaring the museum's presence to passers-by.¹²⁰ The reopening of the museum's historic entrance on the Boulevard is celebrated as yet another step in welcoming the public and reuniting the building with its urban surroundings (Figure 18).¹²¹

The transparency espoused by the VMFA is at least as much metaphorical as it is material. The museum's emphasis on the ability of the transparent glass to expose its activities to the public, encouraging in them a sense of ownership and welcoming them inside, suggests an association with the ethical values of accountability and democracy in the tradition of the Foster's Reichstag. These statements, however, cannot go completely unchallenged, and like the Reichstag, transparency at the VMFA may be more symbolic than actual. First, the long side of the rectangular addition, and therefore, its primary facade and main entrance, faces the parking deck rather than the Boulevard, and although the museum proudly announces that the original museum entrance facing the Boulevard has been reopened, the majority of visitors approach from the parking deck and enter the museum through the entrance to the McGlothlin Wing.¹²² Furthermore, most of the glass utilized in the expansion opens into the atrium rather than the museum galleries, which, with a few exceptions, are windowless. While the few sculptures that currently stand in the atrium are indeed visible through these windows, the museum should perhaps

¹²⁰Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, "VMFA Will be Welcoming Beacon for All," April 22, 2010, accessed February 7, 2012, http://www.vmfa.state.va.us/Press_Room/Expansion/VMFA_will_be_Welcoming_Beacon_for_All.aspx.

¹²¹Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, "Expansion at VMFA."

¹²²Labelled the "Main Entrance" on the museum map, its purpose as such is clear due to its position in relationship to visitor services. Visitors entering the McGlothlin Wing walk past restrooms, a coat check, museum shop, and visitor information desk before intersecting the atrium. One could argue that the immediate confrontation with visitor services and the atrium space, rather than with the galleries, as occurs at the NCMA, works against the VMFA's efforts at accessibility. However, having a map handed to you on your way in does help to ensure that all galleries of interest will be easy to locate.

moderate its claims regarding the works of art that will now be “showcased” to the citizens of Richmond.¹²³ Avoiding windows in the galleries, however, is arguably a wise decision necessary for the preservation and display of the art, which serves to fulfill another important goal: providing “art-friendly spaces” for the collections.¹²⁴

Qualifications notwithstanding, the gesture of accessibility and accountability offered by the VMFA’s large window wall facing the Boulevard is a welcome addition, and one that is at least symbolically, if not also effectively, more democratic than the “transparent” facade of the NCMA. By contrast, the many window walls opening into the NCMA’s galleries necessitate translucent curtains to regulate the influx of light to levels acceptable for the preservation of the art. When drawn, these curtains allow light to enter the museum but prevent views from outside the museum into the gallery space. Furthermore, the NCMA’s remote location relative to the city of Raleigh as well its considerable distance from the road makes any views from outside to inside irrelevant from the perspective of symbolizing accountability and welcoming visitors, as anyone with access to these views is most likely already in the process of a museum visit.

The NCMA’s “transparency,” therefore, is decidedly unidirectional.¹²⁵ Expressed solely on and from inside the museum, it appropriately serves the privileged gaze of the literal and figurative insider. This interior “transparency,” as expressed by the frequent views outdoors (and supposed connection to nature), open floor plan, luminous white

¹²³Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, “Expansion Fact Sheet.” The east window is said to “signal the purpose of the building by showcasing works of art and revealing activity within the museum.”

¹²⁴Lee Rosenbaum, “Virginia is for Art Lovers,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 1, 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703559004575256763161159570.html>.

¹²⁵Recall the argument of the previous chapter that while the facade fails to dematerialize, the interior arguably does so, to the disadvantage of context and history.

walls, and minimal orienting and explanatory information implies a freedom of both movement and interpretation that the NCMA equates with accessibility, visitor agency, and an experience devoid of the pretension characteristic of museums of the past. As evidence from Visitor Services suggests, however, the stark white installation design and reduction of orienting and interpretive text is, in fact, the biggest obstacle to a democratic, accessible visitor experience.

According to the museum's visitor services associate, Gretchen Laming, the colorless, strictly minimal aesthetic imposed by Wheeler often finds itself in direct conflict with the actual needs of visitors. Perhaps the most telling and amusing example of this is that while the old building had a visitor feedback box where visitors could leave paper feedback forms, it was determined that a similar box would "disrupt the aesthetic" of the new building (although the presence of a donations box near the entrance is apparently acceptable). The solution was to allow visitors to submit feedback electronically through the museum's website. Perhaps not surprisingly, this method is not very functional (or democratic, as certain visitors may not have access to the internet), and visitor services is struggling with how to best accommodate visitors who give verbal feedback to volunteers or who wish to give written feedback onsite. Currently, this is being solved with a visitor feedback box tucked discreetly out of sight behind the information desk (which, itself, ironically was not labeled when the new building first opened, and visitors had difficulty identifying it).¹²⁶

¹²⁶Gretchen Laming (visitor services associate), interview with the author, Raleigh, NC, November 14, 2010.

Reportedly, the most common visitor complaint received is that signage is insufficient, poorly located, and too small or difficult to read. This includes anything from signs directing cars to the visitor parking lot, to signs indicating the building's entrance, to text labels for the artwork.¹²⁷ Visitors have complained that the text labels are often located too far away from the artwork, and are therefore difficult to find, or simply do not provide enough information about each work. Finally, the minimal labels have resulted in confusion for visitors trying to use either one of the two available audio tours, as they either are unable to find the code they must enter to listen to the audio for an individual piece, or they are unable to identify which tour is available for the artwork. Visitor services believes that color-coding the different tours may improve this situation, but as introducing any color into the galleries would interfere with the aesthetic, their hands are tied.¹²⁸

From my experience, one of the most significant ways in which Wheeler's strict minimalist aesthetic interferes with a democratic, accessible visitor experience is the result of the combination of the open floor plan with minimal explanatory and orienting information. The presence of text is so limited, in fact, that labels giving the general contents of a series of galleries (for example, "French and American Impressionism / 17th-19th century European Art / Jewish Art") appear on the outside of only one of many possible entrance points, along the walls bordering the main hall, and only then in white letters on white walls (Figure 19). Not only are these difficult to see, but the location does

¹²⁷In support of the "storage shed" characterization of the West Building's appearance, before the old Stone building reopened after the renovation, ten percent of visitors reportedly went there first, unable to "find" the new building, which was of course essentially right next to the old one, because there was no signage identifying it.

¹²⁸Laming, interview.

not suit the natural flow of visitors, who walk through adjoining galleries without first returning to the central artery. In combination with the lack of wall texts and the fact that labels for individual works infrequently contain more than basic identifying information (e.g. artist, title, date), the result is that visitors walk through a series of galleries with little to cue them to the organizing principle of the room, or even to their location in the museum.¹²⁹ The effect can be very disorienting. Notably, while the museum is unwilling to disrupt the aesthetic of the galleries with even the most summary orienting information, the inside of each gallery prominently bears the names of donors.¹³⁰ To confused visitors, who may feel excluded due to the unavailability of explanatory or even basic orienting information, the names merely serve to reassert class divisions that the museum purportedly strives to break.

It is possible that given the lack of reference points, the museum's desire to encourage free circulation may actually have the opposite effect on certain visitors, resulting in anxiety and increased rigidity in their approach to moving through the space. Nathalie Heinich has described how in the Pompidou Centre in Paris, an institution built with a desire to "democratize culture" and the aspiration to "multipurpose use, transparency, and internal fluidity," uninitiated visitors often wandered aimlessly due to the center's confusing topography and lack of reference points.¹³¹ The solution for some

¹²⁹The map of the museum identifies groups of galleries according to broad areas of the collection, similar to, but sometimes even broader than the labels found on the exterior walls (i.e. European Art).

¹³⁰The first impression of confused visitors may be that the works are displayed together because they were all given by the named donor. According to Gaard, while in some cases, certain works in the room were gifts or promised gifts from the named individual(s), more often they bear no greater connection to the room than representing a significant donor's area of artistic interest.

¹³¹Nathalie Heinich, "The Pompidou Centre and Its Public: The Limits of a Utopian Site," trans. Chris Turner, in *The Museum Time-Machine: Putting Cultures on Display*, ed. Robert Lumley (London: Routledge, 1988), 199, 206.

was to keep to a carefully planned route in order to avoid the possibility of becoming lost.¹³² For visitors prone to feeling uncomfortable or unwelcome in such institutions, who have difficulty “coping with this abundance of possibilities, to which the possess no prior key,” the effect may be to convince them that they in fact, do not belong.¹³³

Once again, comparison with the VMFA is fruitful, as both museums with a claim to transparency have expressed a desire for an accessible and democratic visitor experience. As with their respective exteriors, their differing interpretations and expressions of transparency in the interior layout and installation design have different consequences for the realization of these values. In fact, an explicit goal of the VMFA was to simplify “the complexities of navigating the museum’s original 1936 building, three successive additions, and the new wing.”¹³⁴ By contrast with the NCMA, the VMFA’s goal of improved navigation is not hindered by the equation of “transparency” with a minimalistic, “neutral” space for art, and, as a result, the museum achieves this goal quite successfully. Ample labels on gallery walls and on either side of the glass walkways spanning the atrium, which connect the old galleries to the new, inform visitors of their location within the museum and direct them to other galleries of their choice. In the context of abundant orienting information, the long sight lines provided by the alignment of gallery entrances and the relatively open floor plan promote free circulation while avoiding visitor confusion. Colored walls visually define individual galleries or sequences of galleries while adding visual interest and context to the space. Although

¹³²Ibid., 208.

¹³³Ibid.

¹³⁴Rosenbaum, “Virginia is for Art Lovers.”

series of galleries are named after donors, they are also identified thematically, and nearly all include wall texts identifying and introducing the governing principle of the room and providing historical context for a geographic location, period, style, and/or theme represented by the works within.

In fact, the presence of information rather than its absence appears to lie at the heart of the VMFA's efforts to be transparent and accessible, while upholding the museum's stated educational mission.¹³⁵ Nearly all of the works on display have explanatory labels, offering more in-depth historical and contextual information to the interested visitor, while not appearing visually distracting or dominant in the room.¹³⁶ Several galleries even include books with further information on the works on display (for both adults and children) unassumingly placed on benches.¹³⁷ Finally, the new museum library, visible through a curving glass wall in the atrium and fully open to the public, is one of the new wing's most significant democratic gestures.

The effect of the presence of information at the VFMA versus its absence at the NCMA is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the different manner in which each museum addresses large collections gifted by a single donor. At the NCMA, the Cantor Rodins certainly figure prominently in a visit to the West Building. Installed at the far end of the central artery and heavily featured in the museum's promotional materials, they are arguably the centerpiece of the expansion project. Given that the museum's collection is

¹³⁵According to Nygres, "The VMFA's charter and its status as a state institution of higher learning drove the expansion of its campus and the design of the new wing." See Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, "Expansion at VMFA."

¹³⁶The labels are not obtrusively large and they are the same color as the walls.

¹³⁷Although the books are published by the museum, and admittedly, therefore, are unlikely to offer diverse or contradictory opinions, their presence is nonetheless appreciated.

relatively modest, such a large collection of Rodins, almost visually crowding the gallery, is all the more conspicuous, and naturally prompts numerous questions from interested visitors. Yet, there is no information about Rodin's life or career, and not even enough information in most cases to identify many of the predominantly small works as either studies for or enlargements of *The Burghers of Callais* or *The Gates of Hell*. Although the gallery is named after Cantor, there is little to explain its contents, or why, for example, such a relatively large portion of the museum has been dedicated to the work of one man. Of course, given the prestige of Rodin, this is likely assumed to need no explanation.

The collections of the VMFA have similarly been shaped by a small number of prominent donors. Most conspicuous among them is Paul Mellon, whose personal tastes quite literally define the contents of several galleries. Unlike the NCMA's treatment of the Cantor collection, however, the VMFA is quite explicit about Mellon's role in the museum's history and its collections. A text panel on the wall of a small gallery devoted to Mellon's collection of American paintings, for example, informs visitors, who are suddenly confronted by a surprising number of paintings of horses in profile, that Mellon was quite fond of Virginia history and horse racing. Although repeated reference to donors risks becoming tiresome and elitist, when information explains, rather than merely praises, a donor's presence in the museum, the effect is arguably democratizing. By calling attention to the lasting influence of a few powerful individuals on present-day museum collections, the VMFA destroys any illusion of the omniscient unquestioned authority of the museum (and the corresponding assumption that one must be in the presence of "great art") and transfers the power to visitors, who, by virtue of being better

informed, may become more confident and engaged in their personal encounters with the works on display.

At the NCMA, not just the disorientation caused by the lack of information, but the lack of information itself is perhaps the biggest single stumbling block to the museum's democratic mission. It is unclear how the museum can claim a mission to educate as part of a responsibility of this "public trust" while so actively avoiding any type of pedagogy, and wasting what opportunities the building's open design provides for new types of critical interrogation by simply promoting a largely autonomous reading of art. Daniel Sherman has similarly criticized the Musée d'Orsay in Paris for its lack of explanatory texts and overall marginalization of history in favor of formal concerns. The museum's first director, the late Françoise Cachin, not unlike Wheeler believed that "the force of the work speaks for itself, and history, in an art museum, is the history of art."¹³⁸ Sherman argues that for a museum that wishes to expand its public beyond the elite, "presenting works as part of a historical totality, part of a context larger than art, can facilitate this task enormously."¹³⁹

Admittedly, an audio tour providing additional (sometimes historical) explanatory information about particular works in the collection in the form of one-minute "conversations" by curators, and in some cases the artists themselves, is available. However, unlike the museum, it is not free, and the marginalization of such information to an optional experience, which many visitors may not even realize is available, only

¹³⁸Daniel J. Sherman, "Art History and Art Politics: The Museum According to Orsay," *Oxford Art Journal* 13, no. 2 (1990): 55-67; Françoise Cachin, as quoted in Sherman, 61.

¹³⁹Sherman, "Art History and Art Politics," 65.

serves to underscore the secondary status the museum ascribes to history.¹⁴⁰ What is free is a “soundtrack experience” tour, which contains “sound and story experiences from contemporary society,” such as a sound clip of Julia Child discussing European markets in front of *Market Scene* by Frans Snyders. Educational materials, termed “art encounters,” similarly eschew a more traditional didactic approach in favor of encouraging visitors to make personal connections with the artworks, often exploring themes across collections as related to contemporary experience instead of providing focused historical information.¹⁴¹ Although there is nothing inherently wrong with providing these types of experiences, visitors looking for anything deeper will leave disappointed, unless they are willing to purchase catalogs from the museum shop.¹⁴² Although the installation is frequently discussed in terms that emphasize visitors’ individual freedom of experience and interpretation—the open sight lines are said to encourage “century-crossing comparisons”—and visitors are encouraged to make new connections between the works on display, they are given next to no historical tools with which to do so.¹⁴³

The consequence of such limited historical information is effectively to reinscribe the very same social divisions that the museum is attempting to break down. In the

¹⁴⁰Visitors have the option of paying for a wand to listen to the tour or calling a number on their cell phones to hear commentary on individual works of art. Although the cell phone option may be essentially free for the many visitors who have unlimited cell phone plans, this will not be the case for everyone. Similarly, visitors with both an internet connection and a portable mp3 player who happen to go to the museum’s website before their visit can download the contents of the tour for free.

¹⁴¹With the exception of the guide to the Egyptian galleries, the only educational material reused from old building.

¹⁴²The NCMA’s *Handbook of the Collections* is available for \$60.00.

¹⁴³Chuck Twardy, “Art Museum’s Collection Stars upon New Stage,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, April 25, 2010, <http://www.newsobserver.com/2010/04/25/451383/art-museums-collection-stars-upon.html>.

context of Krzysztof Pomian's argument that the governing principle of all types of collections throughout history is the objects' ability to function as "semiofores," evoking an "invisible" world through their visible presence, Bennett calls attention to the process by which, with the advent of modernism, the "visible" objects on display in public art museums came to evoke the "invisible" category of "art."¹⁴⁴ As is the case with the NCMA, although the artifacts on display may be freely and publicly available, the knowledge of history and theory necessary to read "the invisible grid of intertextual relations through which the works on display can be experienced as 'art,'" often is not. The result, according to Bennett, is that in organizing the field of the visible to point to a larger significance that cannot strictly be seen, "the art museum is . . . simultaneously organizing a division between those who can and those who cannot see the invisible significances of the 'art' to which it constantly beckons but never makes manifest."¹⁴⁵

Postmodern Transparency and the Future of the NCMA

Although I fully believe that information is in essence democratic, empowering individuals rather than limiting their agency and interpretive freedom, it must be emphasized that a simplistic view of transparency and democracy, which implies one stable view through a clear window onto a single reality, is of course flawed. The old certainty with which Modernists once gazed across a transparent threshold has not only been exposed as false by postmodernism, but "can be seen to be oppressive and directly related to exclusion, power, and control."¹⁴⁶ As Whitely suggests:

¹⁴⁴Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 171. See Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500–1800* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 7–44.

¹⁴⁵Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 171.

¹⁴⁶Whiteley, "Intensity of Scrutiny," 15.

In postmodern society, we should expect to experience diversity and disorientation. At one level, this could mean greater validity for reflective glass buildings, especially when the reflection is fragmented but, less literally, it means that the complexity we experience should make us more aware of power relations. It follows that we should, indeed, be suspicious of simple transparency that supposedly reveals democracy clearly. According to this view, the claims for the symbolic significance of transparency in the Reichstag are misleading and even threaten, rather than uphold, democratic values.¹⁴⁷

In this interpretation, the fragmented reflections offered by the NCMA's exterior may, in fact, be its most democratic feature. Certainly on the interior, despite the museum's stated interest in encouraging multiple viewpoints, an aesthetic, ahistorical view of art is the only one offered.

A transparent museum, then, is perhaps at best a postmodern one—a museum that reveals and questions its own processes and the biases of history, presents multiple viewpoints, encourages varied interpretations, and prompts visitors to continually ask questions and challenge their assumptions. Unfortunately, the rigidity with which the West Building has been designed constrains curatorial choices and restricts its potential. Belying its claims to transparency, rather than “deferring to the art,” the building actually interferes with its exhibition by limiting options for interpretation and display. In an interview with the author, a member of the professional staff remarked that the design purity of this “high-concept building” puts limitations on the sizes and shapes of the galleries. Despite the flexibility promised by moveable walls, the geometry of the ceiling coffers restricts gallery size, and along with the whiteness, prevents the creation of intimate or more contextual spaces. The building will, therefore, not adapt well to change in response to visitor feedback or curatorial preference, since it holds together

¹⁴⁷Ibid.

conceptually only when its specific geometry is maintained. As a final irony, the building supposedly connected with nature is locked in a struggle against its natural environment—that is, the natural tendency toward dirt and disorder. According to the professional staff member, the white walls and glass have proven difficult and expensive to keep clean, potentially diverting resources that could be used to care for and interpret the existing collection, acquire new works, or fund educational and public programming. Ultimately a contradictory and disingenuous space at odds with both functional and metaphorical interpretations of transparency, the West Building not only fails to deliver the democratic and accessible visitor experience it promises, but actively limits the potential for such an experience.

Conclusion

The North Carolina Museum of Art's West Building, opened to the public in April of 2010, is the third building in the museum's history to house the permanent collections. Although the West Building appears to be a significant departure from the museum's humble beginnings in a renovated office building in downtown Raleigh in 1947, and the dark, bunker-like "East Building" built on its present site in 1983, the design and philosophy of the expansion project are, in fact, deeply related to this history. The tradition of public support that founded the museum and funded the Stone Building has persisted on a much larger scale for the 2010 expansion and renovation, with the public commitment totaling \$86.2 million, and it continues to inform the museum's identity as a "public trust" and its mission "to belong to everyone equally."¹⁴⁸ Despite pride in their tradition as a state-funded museum and identification with democratic values, however, the controversial decision in 1972 to locate the museum building on the Blue Ridge Road property rather than on the government complex downtown placed a higher value on a large, "natural" setting than on public accessibility. This decision not only clearly contradicted the museum's stated values, but prefigured the aesthetic discourse the West Building would later embody under the aegis of Wheeler and Phifer at the expense of a democratic, accessible visitor experience.

¹⁴⁸North Carolina Museum of Art, "Museum Expansion: Design and Construction Fact Sheet," <http://ncartmuseum.org/images/uploads/designconstructionfactsheet.pdf>; Phifer, "Interview with Thomas Phifer."

The West Building's single-story aluminum and glass facade and glowing white interior, illuminated by numerous skylights and window walls opening onto sculpture courtyards and the surrounding Museum Park, is consistently described by the museum, Phifer, and the architectural press in terms of transparency, openness, and democracy. Contrasted with the opacity of the NCMA's dark, bunker-like East Building and the flamboyant Guggenheim Bilbao, the West Building is said to "disappear," "dissolve," or "dematerialize," "deferring to the beauty of the artworks and the surrounding landscape." "Transparency" as expressed by the frequent views outdoors (and supposed connection to nature), open floor plan, luminous white interior, and minimal orienting and explanatory information implies a freedom of both movement and interpretation that the NCMA equates with accessibility, visitor agency, and an experience devoid of the pretension characteristic of museums of the past. The "transparent," "open," single-story building is thought to symbolize and promote the type of democratic museum experience consistent with the NCMA's identification as "a great public trust."

Although clearly an effort to counter the imposing, authoritative architectural and curatorial language of traditional museums and to avoid the typical series of windowless galleries, the white, contextually-void West Building nevertheless participates in the type of "two-fold alienation" of which modern museums have been accused.¹⁴⁹ Views to manicured sculpture gardens do little, *pace* Phifer, to connect art to the "outside world."¹⁵⁰ Instead, the stark white walls, the luminous, shadowless, ethereal atmosphere, and the minimal contextual information produce a separate spiritual realm, a type of

¹⁴⁹Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum*, 49.

¹⁵⁰Phifer, "Interview with Thomas Phifer."

labyrinth, intended to offer visitors a transcendent experience. Rather than the neutral frame it purports to be, the museum acts as a modern cultural temple, elevating and idealizing art, mystifying the processes of collection and interpretation, and promoting a “pure,” essentially spiritual, aesthetic experience. Meanwhile, the rhetoric of transparency, immateriality, and “connection to nature” surrounding the museum, along with the emphasis on openness and individual freedom, creates, in the absence of significant orienting information, an illusion that visitors are having a truly unmediated (“natural”) experience and belies the way that the architecture and installation are in fact working to structure the space.

The concept of “transparency” in architecture is complex and multivalent, and as a comparison with the 2010 expansion and renovation of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts reveals, alternate interpretations of transparency to those proposed by the NCMA may result in a less problematic museum display and a more successful expression of democratic values. Whereas the NCMA understands “transparency” as the building’s ability to disappear or dematerialize in deference to the art, with views to outdoor landscaped sculpture courtyards supposedly dissolving boundaries between the galleries and their “natural” surroundings, the VMFA demonstrates a nearly opposite interpretation of the concept. In Richmond, the “transparency” offered by the large window wall facing the Boulevard signals a museum that is both welcoming and accountable to the public, emphasizing the ability of the citizens of Richmond to see into the museum (a point of view that is physically impossible at the NCMA). Furthermore, at the VMFA, “transparency” is expressed as the presence, rather than the absence, of information.

By contrast, although the design and installation of the West Building strives to create a democratic and accessible experience, it is, in fact, arguably exclusionary and opaque. As visitor feedback suggests, the reduction of orienting and interpretive information dictated by the minimalist installation design conflicts with actual visitor needs and results in visitor confusion. Furthermore, while both implicitly and explicitly encouraged to make new connections between the works on display, visitors are given few historical tools with which to do so. Although the West Building had the potential to offer a positive alternative to the traditional gallery enfilade that constrains display to chronological sequence in service of a grand narrative, Wheeler's strict anti-historicist vision precludes any opportunities for new types of critical interrogation inherent in the open floor plan. In fact, the rigid design purity of the building has resulted in an inflexible space that limits curatorial choices and diverts resources that might otherwise be used for care and interpretation of the collection or educational and public programming.

One might question how such an idealist and arguably elitist museum could have opened in 2010, when a revisionist art history has long since replaced the traditional view of art as apolitical and universal, and the critical museum theory I have used to evaluate the NCMA is three decades old. The dissatisfaction expressed by curators with the inflexibility of the new building and its inappropriateness for parts of the collection, as well as their demonstrated efforts to work around Wheeler's minimalist requirements, suggests that while many curators may be aware of museum theory and "new" art history, they are often unfortunately not the same individuals holding the purse strings and making the decisions. And although the museum is reportedly "open to change," the

design purity of this “high concept building,” which does not permit so much as a scuff on its “Super White” walls, will admit few if any modifications.¹⁵¹ Perhaps the extra acreage of the suburban setting was necessary after all, if, as it would appear, the achievement of a truly democratic and accessible museum for the citizens of North Carolina must await the construction of yet a third building on the site.

¹⁵¹In an interview with the author, Curator of Design Eric Gaard stated that the museum was open to change based on suggestions from visitor feedback. However, when questioned about the possibility of introducing more historical information, he responded that Wheeler would only consider this if significant data were presented. A member of the professional staff referred to the building as “high concept,” in an interview with the author and expressed frustration at the high costs of maintaining “the pristine conditions of a building that will not admit any kind of scuff marks.”

Figures



Figure 1. *West Building*. North Carolina Museum of Art. Photograph by the author. February 28, 2012.



Figure 2. *West Building Entrance*. North Carolina Museum of Art. Photograph by the author. February 28, 2012.



Figure 3. *West Building and East Building*. North Carolina Museum of Art. Photograph by the author. February 28, 2012.



Figure 4. *East ("Stone") Building*. North Carolina Museum of Art. Photograph by the author. February 28, 2012.



Figure 5. *West Building Facade*. North Carolina Museum of Art. Photograph by the author. November 23, 2010.



Figure 6. *West Building Facade, oblique view*. North Carolina Museum of Art. Photograph by the author. November 23, 2010.



Figure 7. *Rodin Courtyard*. North Carolina Museum of Art. Photograph by the author. February 28, 2012.



Figure 8. *Rodin Gallery with Glass Curtain Wall*. North Carolina Museum of Art. Photograph by the author. November 14, 2010.



Figure 9. *Altarpiece Gallery with Skylights*. North Carolina Museum of Art. Photograph by the author. November 23, 2010.



Figure 10. *View of Gallery Partitions from Main Artery*. North Carolina Museum of Art. Photograph by the author. February 28, 2012.



Figure 13. *Sculpture Hall*. North Carolina Museum of Art. Photograph by the author. November 14, 2010.



Figure 12. Jaume Plensa, *Doors of Jerusalem I, II, & III*, 2006. Resin, stainless steel, and light, (each) 47 1/4 x 62 3/16 x 80 11/16 in. North Carolina Museum of Art. Photograph courtesy of North Carolina Museum of Art.



Figure 13. *McGlothlin Wing*. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Photograph by the author. January 29, 2012.



Figure 14. *McGlothlin Wing*. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Photograph by the author. January 29, 2012.



Figure 15. *Atrium, with walkways and sculpture.* Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Photograph by the author. January 29, 2012.



Figure 16. *Atrium, looking east.* Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Photograph by the author. January 29, 2012.



Figure 17. *East Window*. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Photograph by the author. January 29, 2012.



Figure 18. *Historic Boulevard Entrance*. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Photograph by the author. January 29, 2012.



Figure 19. *Gallery Labels*. North Carolina Museum of Art. Photograph by the author. November 14, 2010.

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